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Iranian Factionalism: Implications for the United States

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Summary

The current infighting in Iran is only the surface manifestation of deep-seated theological, institutional, geographical, and personal divisions. Clerical factionalism, in fact, is the regime's chief weakness. These divisions fuel instability that is likely to work more to the advantage of radical than moderate forces in Iran. The inability of pragmatic or moderate leaders to gain a decisive edge probably will give powerful radical factions a veto over significantly improved relations with the United States for some time to come.

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Three broad categories of Iranian leaders have become apparent since the revolution in 1979. Radicals support aggressive export of the revolution, continuation of the war, and greater government control of the economy. They are most vehemently opposed to the United States. A moderate/conservative coalition generally opposes violent export of the revolution, favors a negotiated end to the war, and seeks to limit the government's economic role. This group is most anti-Soviet but is also suspicious of the United States. Pragmatists maneuver between the two other factions, for the most part choosing policies they believe advance Iran's national interests--and their own political careers.

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This paper was prepared by [] the Persian Gulf Division, Office of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis. Comments and queries are welcome and may be directed to the Chief, Persian Gulf Division, NESA []

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We believe these terms accurately depict the broad divisions in Iranian politics. They are not, however, meant to imply that Iranian political factions are well-defined, coherent entities. Both the moderate and radical camps are comprised of members who share a core set of assumptions and beliefs but who differ among themselves on specific issues. The pragmatists are the most difficult to categorize, since by definition they adhere to some radical and some moderate policies. Pragmatism and moderation, however, are not identical. The pragmatists adopt different positions at different times on the same issue, depending on their calculation of what serves their near-term political interests. Personal relations and familial ties play an important role. Key leaders move in and out of alliances, blurring ideological or policy differences. Many of the clerics are related by blood or marriage, creating loyalties that sometimes transcend other considerations. [redacted]

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The key factor in a change in Iranian perceptions probably will not be the rise to power of a particular leader or faction or Iranian considerations of the practical benefits that might result from better relations; the key is likely to be the extent to which a consensus of Iranian leaders becomes convinced that the United States understands, accepts, and respects the Iranian revolution and its basic precepts. Iranian leaders will have to present evidence to the Iranian people that it was the United States, not Iran, that changed its outlook and made reconciliation possible. [redacted]

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The Roots of Factionalism

The roots of political factionalism are deeply embedded in Iranian religion and culture. Nearly eight years after the revolution, even the central issue of the proper role of clerics in governing remains unresolved. At one extreme are Khomeini and those clerics who accept his interpretation of Shia doctrine as calling for direct clerical rule. These radicals advocate strict clerical supervision of society under the leadership of a supreme religious jurispudent (velayat-e faqih). In the middle are clerical moderates who argue for general clerical supervision, with less direct intervention in the government. At the other extreme are quietists who oppose any clerical involvement in politics--and hence, the whole structure of Khomeini's Islamic Republic. [redacted]

The radicals and moderates presently control the regime. The quietists are on the sideline. Included in this group are the Shia Grand Ayatollahs--those

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senior clerics who theoretically are Khomeini's religious equals. Only four Grand Ayatollahs other than Khomeini are living. One resides in Iraq. Of the three in Iran, one has been under house arrest since 1984 because of his opposition to Khomeini; one engages in moderate criticism of the regime; and one generally avoids involvement in politics. [redacted]

The dissent of the Grand Ayatollahs and other influential Shia clerics from the concept of theocratic government as practiced by Khomeini works against the institutionalization of his regime. Once Khomeini dies, his religious critics probably will speak out more forcefully against Khomeini's doctrines. His heirs, lacking his religious credentials, are likely to be on the defensive on this issue. This may force them to cling even more strongly to Khomeini's legacy on other issues, for fear that an admission of his fallibility on any one policy would lend credence to the charge that Khomeini's whole concept of clerical rule was flawed. [redacted]

Institutional Division

The clerics are divided by institutional rivalries. The regime contains a variety of competing power centers, only some of which are part of the government structure. The most important institutions--in and out of the government--each have leaders who are key players in the succession struggle. Over 10 quasi-official revolutionary organizations that sprang up during the revolution remain largely autonomous, despite some government success in recent years in bringing them more under central control. These include the Revolutionary Guard, the komitehs--revolutionary cells that carry out many of the functions of local governments--and the Foundation for the Oppressed, which took over much of the Shah's assets. Included as well is the Qom theological circle--influential clerics in Iran's theological capital who have their own network of followers, many of whom are armed. [redacted]

The most significant rivalry between traditional government institutions and revolutionary organizations is between the Revolutionary Guard and regular armed forces. The Guard is the clear winner and is well along toward supplanting the regular army as Iran's premier military force. The Guard has steadily expanded its manpower and equipment, and it has been shaped more along conventional military lines. Last year Khomeini decreed that it develop its own air and naval forces. The Guard is solidly in the radical camp. Revolutionary Guard Minister Rafiq-Dust; Rezai, the commander of the Guard's combat forces; and the bulk of the Guard's rank-and-file support the radicals' policies on the war and export of the revolution. [redacted]

Within the government, the overlapping and interlocking authority of the executive branch, the Majles (Assembly), the judiciary, and the Council of Guardians reinforces institutional and personal rivalries. The Cabinet, headed by Prime Minister Musavi, has become a bastion of radical influence, with notable exceptions like conservative Foreign Minister Velayati. President Khamenei and his staff are pragmatists, but more likely to support moderate than

radical policies. The 272-member Majles, Rafsanjani's main institutional base, is roughly evenly balanced between radicals and moderates/conservatives. A hardcore conservative bloc of about 90 members has frequently joined with moderates to prevent the passage of radical legislation. The Council of Guardians, whose job is to ensure that legislation is in conformity with the constitution and the laws of Islam, has emerged as the most conservative official body. It has vetoed as "un-Islamic" bills providing for extensive land reform and nationalization of foreign trade. [redacted]

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The regular armed forces do not now and are unlikely in the future to play a significant role in the political process. They have been extensively purged of elements suspected of harboring anti-regime sentiment, and clerical control has been tightened through the installation of loyal officers and an extensive system of informers. The regular forces are likely to become more politically important only if the Revolutionary Guard and other armed revolutionary organizations exhaust themselves in internecine conflict. Even then the regular forces probably will be unable to act independently and will have to seek alliances with more moderate and conservative clerical elements. [redacted]

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Khomeini's Role

The regime has never developed a mechanism to manage policy disputes among these many power centers without resort to Khomeini. His major aim has been to prevent any one from becoming too powerful, rather than resolve disputes in a decisive way that might alienate the losers. He has, in fact, perpetuated the rivalries by playing power centers and leaders off against each other. With Khomeini's control faltering, the barely suppressed rivalries are beginning to surface. His heirs will enter the post-Khomeini era with no precedent of resolving their disputes peacefully among themselves through compromise. [redacted]

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The result of Khomeini's aloofness to date has been relative political stability at the price of near paralysis in policy making. Seven years into the revolution, the regime has not yet resolved such key issues as the nationalization of foreign trade; land reform; private vs. public control of the economy; and rural migration. In foreign policy, all Iranian leaders espouse "export of the revolution," but differ sharply over methods and targets. Conservatives support peaceful efforts, such as expanded contacts with Muslim communities, international seminars, and increased religious proselytizing. Radicals advocate violent methods, including terrorist attacks, training dissidents, and vitriolic propaganda attacks on various Muslim countries. [redacted]

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Policy Disputes

Khomeini's major public statements in recent years have leaned more toward the moderate/conservative position on foreign and domestic policies than toward the radicals, except on the war and relations with the United States. Early this year, Khomeini implicitly supported the rights of private property and a

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large role for free enterprise in the economy. In October 1984 he endorsed the pragmatists' call for new departures in foreign relations designed to end Iran's severe international isolation and expand its diplomatic and economic ties to both East and West. He urged relations with all governments--except the United States, South Africa, and Israel. [redacted]

We believe a trend has developed over the past four years toward a more pragmatic foreign policy. Countervailing pressures continue, however, and no issues appear to have been finally resolved. Pragmatism and moderation are not identical. We believe the conservatives oppose terrorism in principle, for example, whereas the pragmatists' opposition is only tactical. They are quite ready to resort to it if they believe it will advance their goals. As the pragmatists exerted more control over foreign policy, the use of terrorism became more carefully directed at specific objectives and became more lethal. Attacks on US installations in Lebanon are a case in point. Pragmatists also have led Iran into closer relations with Syria and a shared effort to expel US forces from the region. [redacted]

The Balance of Power

In our view, Khomeini's pronouncements have not significantly altered the domestic balance of power between the factions. The radicals are still firmly ensconced at all levels of Iranian politics. More importantly, they are better armed than their rivals. Radicals dominate the Revolutionary Guard, and the Guard is likely to be the key in determining the outcome of the leadership struggle. [redacted]

The pivotal role of the Guard also will influence significantly the future of Iran's relations with the United States. The Guard is troubled by factionalism, which [redacted] is growing. Different units are more loyal to local clerics, commanders, or political leaders than to the Guard hierarchy. The key political contenders are likely to compete for the loyalty of Guard factions to support their bid for power. The need of political leaders to maintain Guard support works strongly against moderating trends in Iran. The pragmatists, even if they gain the upper hand in the power struggle, are likely to owe their success more to their radical constituency in the Guard than to any other single element. This will be a major impediment to their chances of adopting more moderate policies or seeking an opening to the United States as a means of solving Iran's growing military and economic problems. [redacted]

Montazeri's Role

The power of the radicals made Ayatollah Montazeri, Khomeini's designated successor, an important ally of those favoring more moderate policies. Montazeri in the early years of the revolution espoused radical causes, especially on aggressive export of the revolution. He had close ties to the Revolutionary Guard and supervised its ideological training. Over about the

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25X1 past three years, Montazeri has tried to moderate his image. He has called for curbs on revolutionary organizations and reduced government involvement in the economy. [redacted] he has recently severely criticized radical Prime Minister Musavi. He also reportedly distrusts the Revolutionary Guard and has removed them from his personal bodyguard and replaced them with men from his hometown. [redacted]

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Montazeri was probably too weak politically even before the recent arrest of his associates to initiate dramatic policy changes on his own in a post-Khomeini Iran. As Khomeini's handpicked successor, however, he could have bolstered the legitimacy of moderate policies advocated by other Iranian leaders and help tilt the balance more in their favor. The undermining of his prestige has reduced his usefulness to the moderates. We believe the setback to the moderates on this score outweighs the gains of eliminating a small group of radicals in Montazeri's entourage. [redacted]

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Rafsanjani's Role

The increasing influence of Rafsanjani seems to have mixed results for the moderates. As someone who approaches policy largely bereft of ideological blinders, we expect Rafsanjani must have begun to have doubts about continuing the war at the price of practically destroying the Iranian economy and risking Iran's long-term ability to be the dominant power in the Gulf--and to play a large role in the Middle East--simply to eliminate the Ba'thist regime in Iraq. Of all the contenders for power, Rafsanjani seems best poised after Khomeini dies to move Iran gradually and incrementally toward a moderation of its revolutionary excesses. [redacted]

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At the same time, Rafsanjani's success in becoming the regime's second most powerful political figure reflects his skill in maintaining support among both radicals and moderates and avoiding a firm commitment to either camp's agenda. His power rests not on his leadership of a coherent coalition committed to a particular set of policies--much less moderate ones--but on his ability to stay on top of the shifting political infighting among groups pursuing diverse objectives. [redacted]

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If moderation is indeed Rafsanjani's ultimate goal, he must first consolidate his power, and to do that, he needs radical support. Probably more to the point, he must avoid taking any steps that would cause the radicals to coalesce into an anti-Rafsanjani bloc. In particular, he--like any other contender--will need the support of significant Revolutionary Guard factions to gain political dominance. In order to mollify his radical constituency, we believe Rafsanjani must continue to tread carefully on the two issues that the radicals view as the litmus test of commitment to the revolution and to Khomeini's legacy: continuation of the fight against Iraq and opposition to the United States. [redacted]

25X1 Besides having to appease the radicals, Rafsanjani's hardline stance on the

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war also offends the moderates. He has assumed a more prominent role this year in directing the war and is heavily involved in preparations for the offensive. His influence will be enhanced if an offensive succeeds, but damaged if it is postponed indefinitely or is launched but fails. Rafsanjani's political survival would not guarantee that Iran will someday turn toward moderation, but his demise would be a severe setback for such prospects. [REDACTED]

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Implications for the United States

We do not believe that any Iranian leader other than Khomeini has the power to initiate a rapprochement with the United States or even to offer such a suggestion for debate. Relations with the United States remain in a unique category. Khomeini has exempted the United States from the countries with which Iran should seek good relations. This fact together with the Islamic revolution's inherent animosity toward the United States makes it virtually impossible to judge Iran's readiness to improve relations with Washington by assessing general trends toward moderation. The Iranians are capable of seeking closer ties to Western Europe, for example, while still treating the United States as a pariah. [REDACTED]

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Iran's anti-US stance was not adopted as a pragmatic move that can be abandoned overnight just as pragmatically, nor was it a knee-jerk reaction easily discarded after more sober afterthought or considerations of the practical benefits of reconciliation. It is a basic element in the ideological precepts of Khomeini's Islamic revolution. It is rooted in the fundamentalists' view of the United States not only as the chief threat to the survival of their Iranian revolution but as the main obstacle to their divinely-inspired obligation to spread that revolution throughout the world. [REDACTED]

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Both superpowers are seen by Khomeini as forming an antagonistic front against Islam, but he holds the United States in special contempt because of its former relationship with the hated Shah and because it is perceived as more powerful worldwide and therefore more threatening. In the Iranian fundamentalists' view, the threat is more than raw power. It is the cultural seduction of the West's materialism, secularism, and sexual liberalism that leads Muslims away from traditional Islamic values. [REDACTED]

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Rapprochement with the United States after years of preaching this view would thus call into question the regime's claim of religious invincibility. The death of Khomeini and the resolution of the power struggle in favor of the moderates/conservatives--which we believe is the less likely outcome--would enhance the prospects for improved relations. Even then, Khomeini's legacy will not be easily abandoned. The key factor in a change in Iranian perceptions probably will not be the rise to power of a particular leader or faction or Iranian considerations of the practical benefits that might result from better relations; the key is likely to be the extent to which a consensus of Iranian leaders becomes convinced that the United States understands, accepts, and respects the Iranian revolution and its basic precepts. Iranian leaders will

have to present evidence to the Iranian people that it was the United States, not Iran, that changed its outlook and made reconciliation possible. [REDACTED]

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We do not believe Iran's economic downturn will have much near-term influence on its leaders' receptivity to improved relations with the United States. A government dominated by pragmatists and moderates probably would devote more resources to economic rebuilding, but while the power struggle continues, these groups are more likely to expend their political capital on winding down or ending the war than on the more risky effort to improve relations with Washington. They probably would not anticipate significant US economic aid under the best of circumstances, and we do not believe that even those leaders willing to draw closer to the United States politically would be willing or able to increase Iran's economic dependency on the United States. [REDACTED]

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We have no evidence that the leadership currently is considering specific options for making overtures to the United States, and therefore can only conjecture what issues are likely to arise. We expect they will be:

- The war, and related issues of US support for Iraq and for Iran.
- Iran's involvement in terrorism.
- Iran's support for radical Shias in Lebanon, and the Shias military actions against Israel and Israeli surrogate forces.
- Tehran's militant opposition to Israel's existence. [REDACTED]

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| <u>Factions</u> | <u>Supporters</u> | <u>Stance on Succession</u> | <u>Role of Clerics</u> | <u>Views on War</u> | <u>View of US/USSR</u> |
|--|--|--|--|--|---|
| RADICALS | | | | | |
| 1) Prime Minister M'savi 2) Revolutionary Guard Commander Rezaei 3) Revolutionary Guard Minister Rafiq-Dust 4) Deputy Foreign Minister Sheikholslam 5) State Prosecutor Hjjjat ol-Eslam Khomeiniha | Revolutionary Guard Revolutionary Committees Cabinet Friday Prayer Leaders Urban lower class | Unhappy with Ayatollah Montazeri's* moderate stance on key issues over last two years. Probably will push for leadership council which radicals would hope to control. | Radical clerics favor tight clerical control. Many non-clerical radicals would eventually like to push clerics out of government. | Most favor continuing war until Saddam and Ba'th party toppled. | Anti-Soviet but see US as greatest threat. |
| MODERATE/CONSERVATIVE | | | | | |
| 1) Deputy speakers of Majles Hjjjat ol-Eslam Yazdi and Ayatollah Azari-Qomi 2) Supreme Court Head Ardabili 3) Ayatollah Mahdavi Kani 4) Grand Ayatollahs Golpayegani and Marashi-Najafi | Majles (parliament) Senior clerics in Qom Local clerics Bazaar Merchants Army | Generally oppose Ayatollah Montazeri as lacking religious credentials; also oppose Khomeini's view that supreme cleric should supervise the government. | Moderates generally favor loose clerical supervision. Conservatives favor limited clerical role, believe clerics should provide only general guidance. | favor negotiated end to war. | Most anti-Soviet group; suspicious of US; but probably favor improvement over long-term. |
| PRAGMATISTS** | | | | | |
| 1) Assembly Speaker Rafsanjani 2) President Khomeini 3) Ayatollah Montazeri 4) Ayatollah Meshkini | Majles Revolutionary Guard Government bureaucracy Army | Some back Montazeri, others favor a leadership council, depending on which they believe serves their interests. | Favor tight clerical control. | Rafsanjani favors launching another offensive-prominent role in directing the war. Khomeini favors winding down the war, rebuilding economy. Montazeri may have recently shifted to Khomeini's position. | Some pragmatists—in particular Rafsanjani—probably see benefits from rapprochement with US and USSR but lack authority or political support to initiate move. |

*Khomeini's designated successor

**Pragmatists maneuver opportunistically between the two other factions, choosing policies they believe further their own careers and Iran's national interests.

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